India Bangladesh Fence Experience

What is the news?

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- United States President plans to build a wall along the U.S.' 3,200 kilometer long border with Mexico to keep out the Mexicans is hardly a new idea.
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- Several other countries have fenced their borders with their neighbors to keep out illegal migrants, terrorists, and criminals.
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- U.S. must learn from the experience of these countries.
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Why India built fence?

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- India and Bangladesh share a 4,097 km long porous border and the borderland is densely populated.
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- The people inhabiting it have numerous cross-border connections, some going back several centuries and others new.
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- The decision to build a fence to keep them out was made in the 1980s when the issue of **Bangladeshi migration turned politically explosive** in the northeast Indian state of Assam.
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- In a bid to placate Assamese passions, the Indian govt had agreed to put in place a slew of measures, including the construction of a fence to keep out illegal migrants.
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- Thus, an eight-foot-high fence of barbed wire, electrified in some stretches, runs along roughly 70% of this border.
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Why the fence is not effective?

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- Not only are their fences not effective but also, constructing and managing them are **enormously expensive** in terms of money and human lives.
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- Smugglers, drug couriers, human traffickers, and cattle rustlers from both sides of the border too continue to cross the border to ply their trade, often with the collusion of border guards.
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- Most borders are **too long and too lightly guarded** to have an impact on people moving through that space.
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- Where the border runs through rivers, there is no fence.
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- Some 44 km of Assam’s boundary with Bangladesh passes through the Brahmaputra, a river which changes course every year.
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- Besides, the fence has several crossing points where **people with fake documents or bribes can cross the border**.
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- As for its efficacy in keeping out terrorists from India, the fence likely has no impact. A terrorist typically has the funds to pay for fake documents and simply cross the border at checkpoints.
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Why are fences so popular with governments?

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- Border fences **have become nationalist symbols**.
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- They represent the idea of excluding another population i.e., Muslim Bangladeshis in the case of the India-Bangladesh fence.
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- They make a government look tough, like it is taking strong action to protect its people from so-called illegals and outsiders.
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How it spoils the name of the country?

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- The fence is viewed as a **symbol of the distrust** that underlies mutual perceptions.
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- Several people have been gunned down by border guards who have attempted to make their way through fences.
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- **The killing of Feleni,** a 15-year-old Bangladeshi girl in 2011, when she was returning home to Bangladesh, is an example.
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- According to Human Rights Watch report, between 2001 and 2010 BSF personnel gunned down an estimated 900 Bangladeshis.
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- India’s fence-building has had negative impact on its otherwise warm relations with Bangladesh.
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- It has enhanced **India’s image as a bullying big brother** in the eyes of the Bangladeshi people.
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- Also, India has proposals to build transnational roads and rails. Thus, the fence goes against the spirit and substance of this effort toward greater regional cooperation.
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Where will the Bangladeshi people go?

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- Bangladesh is a low-lying country. A fifth of Bangladesh’s territory is likely to go under water if sea levels rise by one meter. And, this is expected to happen by the end of this century.
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- Thus, India cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the problem.
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- Not only would that approach be inhumane but also, the impact of rising sea level on India could be as devastating as it is predicted to be on Bangladesh.

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What is the way forward?

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- Rather than distance itself from Bangladesh on the climate change issue, India should cooperate with it.
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- Taking down the fence is an important first step that Delhi must take.
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- But dismantling walls is more difficult than building them. It **requires political will and a change in mindsets.**
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- Above all, we must recognize that the India-Bangladesh fence has brought little security to the people.
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Source: The Diplomat

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